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SUBJECT: FONMIN ON REGIONAL ISSUES, STRIKES DOMESTIC CHORD

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) Minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs Yusuf bin Alawi gave a wide-ranging interview to a UAE-based newspaper in late-June that garnered an unusual reaction. Speaking on foreign policy issues, the Minister defended USG support for Palestine and security efforts in Iraq, as well as U.S.-Oman negotiations on a Free Trade Agreement. He gave an anodyne comment on Iran's elections, voiced concerns about "reform" in the Middle East, and reiterated Oman's support for developing countries. Asked about the Sultan's recent pardon of 31 convicted Ibadhi extremists, however, the Minister dismissed as "media exaggerations" the government's charge that they sought to overthrow the government. Popular reactions seized upon the apparent discrepancy to further criticize the secret services' handling of the case, and heaped praise on the Minister for his wisdom. End summary.

2. (SBU) In an unusual move, Minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs Yusuf bin Alawi gave a full-page interview published in the June 26 edition of Dubai-based Arabic daily "Al Bayan." Despite leading questions intended to evoke criticisms, the Minister's references to the U.S. were largely laudatory, though he voiced caution over calls for reform.

Iraq

3. (U) Responding to a question implying sole U.S. responsibility for insecurity in Iraq, YBA said the security situation in Iraq is everybody's responsibility, the allied forces and the Iraqis. He added that the international military presence in Iraq is covered under a UN Security Council Resolution and that the U.S. realizes that. He described the U.S. and Coalition aim as "transforming Iraq to a sovereign constitutional state, with an elected parliament; after achieving this, Iraq will be a fully legitimate and sovereign state."

Free Trade Agreement

4. (U) The Minister rejected the suggestion of disagreement among GCC members about engaging in bilateral FTA negotiations with the U.S. He stressed that the U.S. did not impose its policies on the GCC countries, and assured that "FTA will not harm any party."

Middle East Peace

5. (U) Bin Alawi struck a positive tone on the peace process. "There has been a significant positive change in the political arena in Palestine. As a result, the American view to the Palestinian cause is now more positive. In addition, the EU is holding talks with different Palestinian factions including Hamas." In an apparent allusion to groups such as Hamas, YBA opined that the "view towards what is seen now as terrorist groups could change in the future similar to what happened with the U.S. and the PLO." Regarding Lebanon and Syria, the Minister said that the death of Rafik Hariri was a great loss, but hopefully predicted that Lebanese political parties "will be able to work out their differences." The Syrian government, he believes, is trying to move towards change, "but change requires the effort of the people of Syria, is not easy, and it will not happen overnight." He added that rushing change is not practical.

Iranian Elections

6. (U) The Minister said, "Regardless of who is in power in

Iran, there are common interests between the GCC and Iran, so it's important that we organize these interests. (W)e are neighbors; relations have been generally stable despite minor disagreements."

"Reform" in the Middle East

17. (SBU) Reiterating one of his favorite talking points, Bin Alawi stated, "We do not use the word "reform" because in Arabic it is associated with corruption. We use "development" and "modernization" (Arabic: tahdith and tatweer). But this does not mean we are against the concept. Using the word "reform" is a common language error, and it is not used in the Sultanate." He added, "The West's insistence on imposing reform could lead to civil wars." (Note: Illustrating the slant of the newspaper, this lone critical comment was used as the headline for the interview. End note.)

Non-Aligned Movement

18. (U) YBA called the mid-June G-77 summit in Doha a success, noting that countries from the north and the south were able to exchange views and try to resolve differences. He also stated that, "As a part of GCC, Oman will contribute to the Economic Fund for the South proposed by the Emir (of Qatar)." When asked why he did not attend the summit, he replied he was attending a wedding in Salalah. (The MFA Under Secretary represented Oman.)

Remarks on Pardons Earns Popular Kudos

19. (SBU) Asked about the danger posed by the 31 alleged Ibadhi extremists sentenced in May for forming a secret organization and plotting to overthrow the government, the Minister said the Sultan's pardon in June of the convicts was the right thing to do, taking in to account the tolerant nature of the Omani culture. Noting that members of the banned secret organization confessed their guilt, Bin Alawi reminded that pardons are an established government practice. He also stated that popular sympathy for the convicted persons stemmed from the fact that "Oman is a tribal society." Departing from Omani government statements during the arrest and trial of the accused, the Minister added, "The issue is not related at all to attempting to overthrow the government. The media has exaggerated. They were a group of Ibadhis with extreme views aiming to preserve their sect." He added that the pardons do not mean that the former members of the organization can reconstitute it.

110. (SBU) Denizens of the popular Omani Internet message board "Al Sablah" were quick to heap effusive praise on the Minister's comments regarding the pardons. Contributors interpreted Bin Alawi's characterization of the secret organization as a sign of disagreement between senior political and security officials about the arrests. The overwhelming majority of the respondents termed Bin Alawi's more innocuous characterization of the arrestees as the more accurate description of the secret organization. Participants renewed criticism of the Omani security services for their actions, anticipating personnel changes as a result. Having earned popular good will with his comments on the pardons, responses largely praised his temperate comments on foreign policy issues as "diplomatic and wise."